

Tempe Budget Community Forum

Feb. 18, 2010, at 7:30 a.m.
Pyle Adult Recreation Center

The following is a recap of questions asked and answers given during the second of four community forums held in February 2010 regarding the 2010-11 city budget balancing effort. Answers were provided by City Manager Charlie Meyer unless otherwise noted.

Question 1: How can you reduce the police by one-third? How will they still protect us and what will the response time look like?

A: (Fire Chief Cliff Jones) Many of the most serious cuts to Police and Fire are in Level 5 of the plan, which will be the first to be restored. Public safety is very important and we have maximized our efficiency and minimized our costs. While our capacity to respond could be affected by the budget cuts, response times will remain a top priority. Each fire company that is cut would affect response times by 10 percent. We are part of the automatic aid system in the region, so we work in collaboration with other cities to respond to emergencies. If other cities also reduce their service, that could affect all the surrounding communities.

(Police Chief Tom Ryff) I don't believe we can cut sworn officers and provide the same level of service. Emergency service will always be our main priority so, should we face budget cuts, we will transfer officers out of special assignments to patrol so they can respond to emergency calls. Special assignments include gang and crime prevention positions. Since the workload is not going away, the police are going to have to move officers around to meet other needs. As a resident you will probably notice a seamless response to your calls. For example, resources will still be needed in schools. With the reduction of our school resource officers, we will need to pull personnel from patrol to respond to issues at schools.

We see about 110,000 calls for service in Tempe each year; about 50,000 to 60,000 of those are initiated by our officers. That workload will not go away, so there will be an impact on the community over time with having less staff available. We understand the need for a balanced community and know that we need to support this effort. But I am opposed to cutting sworn officers. We have started to see a slight increase in crimes against people. We are committed to doing everything possible to keep up response times to your calls. We have partnered with other agencies and have some of our officers assigned to various agencies, all of which helps our efforts here in Tempe. Those arrangements are set up to augment our existing staff, not to replace it. Our residents have told us they want high-visibility, preventative patrols, so we staff with enough patrol officers to enable that rather than just enough to go from call to call. We average a response time of about five minutes to a 911 call.

Q2: How will dispatch response times be impacted?

A: (Assistant Police Chief Brenda Buren) If we lost the positions identified in Level 5 of the proposal, there would be impacts to both 911 operators and the personnel who talk to officers in the field.

Q3: What kind of ranger or police presence will there be in city parks?

A: (Police Chief Tom Ryff) According to the proposal, we will completely lose park ranger presence in city parks but retain some at Tempe Town Lake. Patrol officers will take over patrolling parks, if they have the time, but that will not be their primary responsibility.

Q4: When I came to Tempe 30 years ago it had good amenities and was a good place to raise kids. I'm in favor of a higher sales tax increase than has been proposed in order to keep that. I'm in favor of more intersection and speed photo radar cameras in Tempe if it would increase revenue. As a member of the city's Parks and Recreation board, I think non-residents should pay a higher fee for Parks and Recreation classes and the city should seek to reach full cost recovery in charging for all classes. Also, we currently charge for ballfield reservations but should initiate charges or charge more for the use of city rooms and buildings by the public.

A: Tempe's quality of life is what this is all about. Our staff takes huge pride in providing that and it hurts to compromise that and to lose some of the people who have provided that. It is all about revenue. The system Arizona has to fund cities is in my opinion broken. We go through these crazy up and down cycles yet we have very limited ability to change. Property tax is capped by statute at 8 percent of our revenue. We just got our property tax notices from the county and expected to see a significant drop in values but we didn't. That is indicative that property tax is a more stable source of funding than sales tax.

We do not do photo enforcement for the purpose of raising revenue – it's for safety. Photo enforcement does a terrific job of bolstering our police presence. My opinion is that photo enforcement does work as a safety measure. We think we are using it appropriately. Revenues from photo enforcement are actually dropping off but that is a good thing because it is having the desired effect as a deterrent.

When it comes to recreation, we aren't allowed to make a profit but we are allowed to recover costs. We have made the decision in the past not to fully recover costs. Facilities like the Tempe Center for the Arts charge for their rooms and the fees are pretty significant. We are trying to achieve cost recovery with programs like Kid Zone.

(Parks and Recreation Manager Mark Richwine) We have been taking measures in the last few years to achieve greater cost recovery and we want to keep moving in that direction. In our proposal was the option to charge for outside groups to use city facilities.

Q5: How has the housing market affected property taxes?

A: We just got our data this week. The primary tax base, which funds our operations, has not gone down. We have seen a 10 percent drop in the secondary tax base, which funds capital projects. I was anticipating a much higher impact than that.

Q6: We need more volunteers, fewer layers of management, fewer Court staff and pay reductions or furloughs. Can we borrow money at low interest rates like the federal government does?

A: We are open to the idea of more volunteers, though the budget balancing proposal includes the elimination of a volunteer coordinator position in Community Services and spreading those duties throughout the city. We need a plan for increasing our numbers of volunteers in order to help maintain the same levels of service. The City Council told staff they wanted to see fewer levels of management, so we are consolidating from 14 departments to seven. We also looked at management layers and have confined them to five layers from department managers to line-level workers. The top items in the budget proposal involve the reduction of management.

There are cuts to Court staff in the budget plan. The Police Department has done such a good job that they keep our Court staff very busy. Tempe has one of the most highly productive Courts in the Valley and in Arizona.

Regarding pay reductions, city staff have had their salaries frozen since 2007-08 for three years. We are now looking at reductions in wages and benefits, which may include furloughs. We are still working on this. We are trying to reach our financial goals while maintaining service levels as much as possible.

Borrowing money and reinvesting it would be illegal for us to do. Other options like re-mortgaging City Hall would be ones I'd recommend against to the City Council. Doing that just to raise cash for operations would only increase our debt load in the end.

Q7: I am concerned about the library and kids programs. We all have favorite programs. I'd like to see everyone get cut a little rather than see some areas get cut totally. I'd rather not see us put people in unemployment lines.

A: Someone at another forum used the term "balance." Shutting the library down completely would save money but it wouldn't improve balance. The Police Department wouldn't want to see the library closed or any other programs eliminated that would impact youth because they know that those programs are valuable for keeping kids productive and busy. These discussions help us get that balance right. The City Council has options for voicing their priorities and reflecting the views of the community.

Q8: Where does all the money come from for upgrades to the History Museum and for \$50,000 in art for Daley Park?

A: We live by the laws that the state legislature gives us. They separate operating money and capital projects money. Capital projects funds come from your secondary property taxes and you vote to improve various things. None of this money can be used to operate departments. The capital projects you mention have been planned for a long time. In other places of the country, cities get to decide how they use their property taxes and they do not have restrictions placed on those funds.

Q9: How will budget cuts affect recycling and garbage?

A: We charge for solid waste service in our monthly bills and we fully recover the costs to provide those services, so those areas of the city are not experiencing the problems that are in the General Fund. These services will not be affected at all. That same type of cost recovery model exists for our Water and Wastewater funds, too. We are not allowed to charge more than it costs to provide the service. We are trying to experiment to collect yard waste, turn it into compost and use it to fertilize our parks. That effort would save money in two ways: what we pay the landfill to take our trash and what we pay for fertilizer.

Q10: Has there been any discussion of opening the History Museum or Petersen House fewer days or hours each week?

A: (Interim Community Services Manager Kathy Berzins) That has been looked at with the History Museum but we will still be able to keep it open the same number of days and hours. We are looking at decreasing hours at the Petersen House but we are talking to the schools because they bring groups of children there.

Q11: Since light rail came, has there been an increase in our revenue?

A: What has happened with redevelopment on Apache Boulevard would not have happened without light rail. We have garnered property tax and sales tax as a result. In addition, many people exit light rail via two downtown stations and they're spending money in downtown Tempe. It's hard to quantify.

Q12: If the 1 percent state sales tax passes how does that help us?

A: It doesn't help us directly. It may alleviate enough pain at the state level that they don't come after some of our revenue sources.

Q13: What is the timeline for budget decisions?

A: The City Council is providing us guidance on how to construct the 2010-11 budget. By March 4, we hope to get this guidance from Council. June 10 would be the final adoption of the budget.